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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/02/2019  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: ACTIVISTS FACE MOUNTING PRESSURE AS ELECTIONS DRAW  
NEAR

REF: A. TUNIS 188  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 167  
[1](#)C. 08 TUNIS 408

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) With presidential and legislative elections a little more than six months away, a number of opposition parties say they are under increasing pressure from the GOT. The opposition at-Tajdid (Renewal) party says the latest issue of its Arabic-monthly Attariq al-Jadd was seized by the government in retaliation for Et-Tajdid's First Secretary Ahmed Brahim's announcement that he was running for president. The opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) also held a press conference, accusing the GOT of instructing hotels to bar the PDP from renting rooms for its national council. Another opposition activist, Tarek Soussi, was given a suspended sentence of three months for giving an interview to al-Jazeera about the unemployment riots in Gafsa. Soussi was charged with disseminating false information likely to disturb public order. End Summary.

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Strike One  
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[1](#)2. (C) With a little more than six months before presidential and legislative elections take place, all three of the independent and semi-independent opposition parties claim that they are targets of GOT harassment. The opposition Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (FDTL) has already issued a statement implying that the GOT is attempting to weaken the party prior to elections (Ref A). On April 1, the opposition at-Tajdid party held a press conference accusing the GOT of banning the March 27 edition of its Arabic-monthly Attariq al-Jadid because at-Tajdid First Secretary Ahmed Brahim announced he was running for president. The edition in question featured a front-page photo of Brahim surrounded by supporters under the headline "I Will Compete With the Government Candidate as his Equal." At-Tajdid contends that the GOT pressured the private company charged with disseminating Attariq al-Jadid not to distribute the paper. Brahim called Attariq al-Jadid's de-facto seizure a serious violation of press freedom, and opined the GOT was attempting to prevent him from promoting his candidacy.

[1](#)3. (C) At-Tajdid's newspaper distribution problems are similar to those encountered by the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) weekly al-Mowqif last year (Ref C). Parties represented in parliament, like at-Tajdid, rarely report these types of incidents. Unlike the other parties in parliament, however, all of at-Tajdid's members in parliament

voted against Ben Ali's constitutional amendment laying out criteria for presidential candidates, and the party has been an active supporter of unemployed workers in Gafsa.

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Strike Two  
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14. (C) On March 31, PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi released a press statement accusing the GOT of ordering hotels not to rent rooms to the party, which is looking for space to host its national council on April 4th and 5th. The press release noted that a series of denied requests to rent public meeting spaces occurred days after President Ben Ali's Independence Day speech (Ref B) declared that all political parties would be able to campaign freely. Jribi told PolOffs on March 25 that multiple hotel managers gave only flimsy excuses as to why rooms were unavailable. She added that the PDP had hosted events in its downtown Tunis headquarters before when there were no other alternatives. That space had difficulty accommodating more than 100 people, and she was expecting over 200 for the national council. PDP regional leaders from around the country are planning to meet April 4th and 5th to determine the party's strategy for the upcoming elections, but without adequate space the party might be forced to postpone the meeting.

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Strike Three, You're Out  
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15. (C) On March 30, the Court of First Instance in Bizerte handed down a suspended sentence of three months in prison to activist Tarek Soussi. Soussi was convicted of disseminating false news likely to disturb public order. The charges stem from an interview he gave to al-Jazeera about the unemployment protests in Gafsa. Soussi is also one of the founders of the International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners (AISPP). Mohamed Abbou, one of Soussi's lawyers, told PolOffs that the trial went well. Abbou said all the defense attorneys were allowed to fully present their arguments, though some of Soussi's supports, such as journalist Lotfi Hajji, were not allowed inside the courtroom. Soussi is expected to appeal the ruling.

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Comment  
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16. (C) Though at-Tajdid, the FDTL, and PDP all say they will proceed with their elections-related campaigns, if pressure increases it is possible the parties will decide to boycott the elections. Both the PDP and FDTL boycotted the 2004 presidential elections. Et-Tajdid won three seats in parliament in 2004, but Brahim has previously told the Ambassador that he will only participate in elections if he can do so in a meaningful way. Should all three parties decide to boycott, not only would it mean none of the parties would stand a change of winning seats in parliament, it would probably detract from the transparent and open elections the GOT says it intends to hold. The Soussi verdict was lighter than many expected. This may be due to recent criticism by international groups arguing that the GOT harasses journalists and activists. End Comment.  
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